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Abstract:

In 1955, journalist William Bradford Huie interviewed Emmett Till's killers and published their confession in *Look* magazine. Entitled "The Shocking Story of Approved Murder in Mississippi," Huie's tale dominated the remembrance of Emmett Till for nearly fifty years. This essay argues that the power of the "Shocking Story" to control the memory of Till's murder resides in its recourse to the "expressive confession," the distinctive power of which is a capacity to naturalize historical events and thereby constitute a master narrative of inevitably in which further rhetorical intervention seems unnecessary. So understood, the "Shocking Story" is not just one more recounting of Till's untimely death, it is also a treatise about the role of speech in the violence of the Mississippi Delta.

Text of paper:

On August 20, 1955, a black fourteen-year old boy known to his friends as "Bobo" and to history as Emmett Till boarded a Chicago train bound for the Mississippi Delta. Although nearly every detail of Till's Delta visit is contested, the standard story runs as follows: Four days after his arrival in the town of Money, Mississippi, Bobo entered Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market on a dare from his friends. Bobo, the story goes, had been bragging about his bi-racial sexual prowess when one of his friends challenged him to prove it: "You talkin' mighty big, Bo . . . There's a pretty little white woman in there in the sto'. Since you Chicago cats know so much about white girls, let's see you go in there and get a date with her."¹ Bobo went in and, depending on which account you trust, did at least one of the following: bought bubble-gum, talked to the "pretty little white woman," asked her for a date, used obscene language, squeezed her hand, put his arm around her waist and pulled her body tight against his, or—what has become the most widely accepted version of the story—simply whistled at her.

The white woman in question was Carolyn Bryant. In the early morning of August 28, Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, along with his half-brother J.W. Milam, showed up at the house where the young Till was staying, forced him to dress, and took him away in Milam's 1955 Chevrolet pickup. Again, depending on which account you trust, Bryant and Milam then did at least one of the following: interrogated the boy and let him go, "whacked" him a few times with a Colt .45, beat him so severely that neighbors heard screams for mercy and mother, castrated him and stuffed his penis in his mouth, drilled completely through his head with a brace and bit, or—what has become the most widely accepted version of the story—beat him, stripped him, shot him in the head, attached his naked and lifeless body to a cotton-gin fan with a length of barbed wire, and sank him in the Tallahatchie river. One thing we know for sure: the river would not hold him. Three days after his abduction a local fisherman spotted Till's feet protruding from water. When the authorities arrived, they pulled the corpse from the water

and, because the body had been beaten beyond recognition, Till's uncle was forced to identify his nephew by the Till-family ring still clinging to his finger.

If the muddy waters of the Tallahatchie could not hold Till's body, neither could the Mississippi Delta hold the *corpus delicti*. *Jet* magazine famously published photos of the boy's face and within days the lynching of Emmett Till was a world-wide news event.² By all indications, the story of Till's death has remained a staple of the American imagination. In the fifty-three year period between 1955 and 2008, only eight years have passed without the story appearing in *The New York Times*.³ Moreover, there has been an enduring and widespread effort to ensure that the story of Emmett Till circulated not only in elite newspapers, but in a wide variety of media. James Baldwin put the story on the American stage, Audre Lorde lodged the story in American poetry, Bob Dylan assured the story a place in American rock and roll, and United Artists even tried to put the story on Hollywood's big screen.⁴ The latest effort to ensure the circulation of Till's story is Keith Beauchamp's celebrated documentary, "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," which toured the country to critical acclaim and was instrumental in the Justice Department's May 10, 2004 decision to reopen the case.⁵

Given the prominence of Till's story and the extent of its circulation, it is not surprising that scholars have attended to its rhetorical dynamics in some detail. The miscarriages of justice have been recorded; the competition between black and white newspapers has been laid bare; the collusion of gendered, classed, and racist arguments in the rhetorical construction of the story's characters has been rightly decried; the rhetorical function of the tortured and pictured black body has been examined; and the arguments of the trial meticulously reviewed. Above all, scholars have insisted on the influence of Till's murder on the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks, we are told, was thinking of Emmett as she refused to cede her seat, and many, many scholars have offered some variation of Davis Houck's claim that the story of Emmett Till functioned as the "moral warrant" of the civil rights movement.⁶

In all this literature, however, insufficient attention has been paid to the politics of circulation, the ways in which the countless retellings of Till's story have been largely, although not exclusively, controlled by one particular—and partisan—version thereof. Nearly five months after the murder, seventh-generation Alabama journalist William Bradford Huie interviewed the killers and wrote "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." Published in *Look* magazine, the "Shocking Story" was, in Huie's modest estimate, "more explosive than UNCLE TOM'S CABIN—and a damn site more honest."⁷ Although Huie's story never captured the American imagination quite like Stowe's novel, it has, more than any other telling of Till's story, provided the terms in which the story would henceforth circulate.⁸ Indeed, evidence suggests that Huie's version of the story was so widely distributed that it shut down the debate over some initially contested facts of the case. The number of accomplices, the extent of the torture, and the place of the murder—these questions were, for the first five months, vigorously debated. That the answers provided by the "Shocking Story" were calibrated to ensure that the perpetrators of the crime would not face further legal action should not obscure the fact that the answers were so widely accepted that they were not again seriously debated for almost fifty years. Historians David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito conclude that Huie's story so "thoroughly dominated the discourse" surrounding the death of Emmett Till that it effectively "pushed aside" all competing accounts "for decades to come."⁹ Although the photos in *Jet* may have seared images of Emmett Till

into the minds of countless Americans, it is Huie's "Shocking Story" that has given those images a storied referent.¹⁰

And yet Huie's story has thus far remained largely outside the purview of those otherwise invested in the symbolic dimensions of Till's murder. A recent "special issue" of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* dedicated to the memory of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr. is telling. The four essays on Till mention Huie's story only to disclaim it as a partisan mistelling of Till's murder.¹¹ It is in fact true that Huie's story is a mistelling, but it is also a powerful mistelling, and its power has yet to be accounted for. The object of this essay, then, is to account for the power of the "Shocking Story" to "push aside" competing accounts, to provide definitive answers to once-contested questions, and, ultimately, to dictate the terms of Till's circulation.

It must be acknowledged that Huie's immediate readership had little trouble accounting for the power of his tale: the power of the "Shocking Story," they claimed, derived from the fact that it appeared to be an inside story. Huie provided such a detailed account of the killers' motives and included so many quotations from J.W. Milam that, even though Huie repeatedly refused to disclose his sources,¹² and even though he promised his editor that he would "not claim that anyone has 'confessed' to me,"¹³ and even though he bought the silence of those who arranged the interview,¹⁴ he was immediately suspected of having an inside source. Congressman Charles C. Diggs, for example, argued that the "stunning revelations are so detailed and stated so positively . . . there is no doubt in my mind that the information came directly from the killers themselves."¹⁵ Indeed, although Huie narrates most of the story, at its climax, immediately before Till is killed, Milam's purported words eclipse Huie's own so as to create the impression that Milam has taken over the telling of the "Shocking Story." Given this ambiguity, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins posed exactly the right question: "Who stands behind these 'facts,' Mr. Huie?"¹⁶ If Mr. Huie alone stands behind the "Shocking Story" then it is difficult to explain the immediate and enduring power of the article. If, however, Milam also stands behind the words printed in *Look*, then the "Shocking Story" is not just a story, it is also a confession, that form of discourse that boasts a privileged relationship to truth and, as Peter Brooks puts it, "bear[s] a special stamp of authenticity."¹⁷

Yet remanding the power of the "Shocking Story" to its generic classification bypasses two critical questions. First, why is it that despite Huie's assiduous efforts to the contrary, the "Shocking Story" was widely received as a confession? This is a transcendental question, asking after the status of what Brooks has called the American "confessional imagination"—the "place [of confession] in our cultural imagination."¹⁸ For it is the shifting contours of the confessional imagination that allow quite different discourses to be understood as confessions at different points in history. Second, why, classified as a confession, did Huie's story accrue more cultural influence than it otherwise might have? Claiming that confession "bears a special stamp of authenticity" is of little help in this regard, for we know that authenticity, like truth, is not something waiting to be disclosed but is rather a "complex of rules" through which the "effects of power are attached" to the authentic. The critical question, then, is not what forms of discourse disclose the authentic, but rather what are the rules, assumptions, and contexts in which certain forms of discourse are granted provisional access to the authentic and thus accrue cultural power.¹⁹

In this essay I argue that we can understand both the reception *and* the power of the "Shocking Story" with recourse to the shift in the confessional imagination marked by the emergence of the expressive confession—a historically specific form of confession that has its roots in the eighteenth century but was flourishing in twentieth-century America. For when, in the eighteenth century, public confession was subsumed into a logic of expressivism, it became a form of discourse uniquely suited for public circulation. But this circulation came at an exacting political price, for the condition of its circulation was its complicity in the naturalization of historical events. Drawing on the work of Eric King Watts, Michael Warner, and Michel Foucault, I suggest that both the circulation and dehistoricization accomplished by the modern confessional form is achieved via a rhetorical ventriloquism whereby the expressive confession is distanced from the speaking confessant.²⁰ I argue that the "Shocking Story" did just this: it distanced the story of Till's murder from its teller, it denied the historical link between confession and culpability, and, in so doing, it dehistoricized the murder by telling it as the effect of cultural norms rather than human actors. Although this may have ensured the circulation of Huie's story, it did so at the cost of occluding Milam and Bryant's historically specific role in the murder. It is then, precisely the capacity of the expressive confession to dehistoricize the murder that can account for its enduring circulation.

The argument proceeds in three sections. In the first I attend to the emergence of expressivism in order to explain the widespread reception of the "Shocking Story" as a confession. Although expressivism is rooted in the eighteenth century, I argue that it was given widespread manifestation in the literary conventions of early twentieth-century America, and that manifestation, in turn, provided the groundwork necessary to read Huie's story as a confession. In the second section I attend to the politics of expressivism, suggesting that the power of the expressive form lies in its claim to transcend the political. I conclude by indicating the essential characteristics of expressivism as a form of public confession and exploring the consequences of expressivism in a democratic polity.

How the "Shocking Story" Became a Confession

Perhaps because of the difficulties entailed in comprehending a murder so brutal, there were, within months of the trial, dozens of exposés each claiming to tell the true story of Emmett Till.²¹ The first was the "Inside Story" written by the renowned African-American journalist James L. Hicks. The "Inside Story" began:

Here for the first time is the true story of what happened in the hectic five-day trial of two white men in Mississippi, for the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago. This story has never been written before.²²

In the months that followed the publication of the "Inside Story," Hick's boasts of originality, authenticity, and truthfulness would be repeated *ad infinitum* by journalists selling competing versions of Till's story. Ernest C. Withers, for example, in a twenty-one page self-published book, promised a complete, factual, and photographically documented rendering of Till's story.²³ Olive Arnold Adams promised to tell the "real story" that was "told in whispers" and not circulated in the mainstream press.²⁴ Finally, the award-winning journalist Ethel Payne published "Mamie Bradley's Untold Story" in

the *Chicago Defender* in which Mamie claimed "to tell the story [of her son's murder] so that the truth will arouse men's consciences and right can at last prevail."²⁵

In addition to the various printed exposés claiming to tell the truth of Emmett Till, there was, within weeks of the trial, a vibrant celebrity-driven lecture circuit committed to providing the public with a comprehensive and "detailed account of the recent murder of Emmett Till."²⁶ Speakers included the Honorable Charles C. Diggs Jr., the first African-American Congressman, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, President of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, NAACP leaders Ruby Hurley, Roy Wilkins, and Medgar Evers, and Till's mother, Mamie Bradley. The Till lecture circuit was a resounding success: 2,500 people in Baltimore's Sharp Methodist Church, 16,000 people crowded into New York's Williams Church, 15,000 in Detroit, 4000 in Cleveland, and Chicago's Metropolitan Community Church reportedly turned away 6000 people who had come to hear Till's story told.²⁷

In sum, despite a *Commonweal* editorial which asked what one could possibly say in the face of such unspeakable horror, and despite the truth of Christine Harold and Kevin DeLuca's claim that the ineffable story of Emmett Till overmatched the powers of "eloquence," the entire Till affair was characterized by an uncommon loquacity.²⁸ From Milam's announcement upon the abduction of the young Till that he was "looking for the boy who'd done the talking," to the myriad of exposés and the vibrant lecture circuit, the story of Emmett Till is so laden with discordant voices that rhetorician Davis Houck can claim that the affair happened not so much in the Mississippi Delta as in the scores of articles and speeches that continually retold Till's story.²⁹

William Bradford Huie was, by his own admission, a late-comer to this truth-saturated market. He did not start working on the case for over a month following the murder and, further delayed by *Look's* 1955 holiday issue, the "Shocking Story" did not appear until January of 1956—nearly five months after Hick's celebrated and syndicated exposés ran in papers across the nation. Yet Huie knew that the market was not so saturated that it could not accommodate one more telling of Till's story, provided it was a first-hand telling. At least to his own satisfaction, Huie believed that it was precisely his ability to write Till's story based on the killers' confession that would set his story apart from the rest. Reflecting on the experience some years later Huie recalled, "I knew enough to assume that Big Milam and Roy Bryant would tell me everything they knew and felt. No other reporter had assumed this."³⁰

Within hours of hearing the confessions of Milam and Bryant Huie wrote Dan Mich, his editor at *Look*, with seemingly unbounded excitement. His interview with the murderers, he explained, provided him insight into the killers' minds and access to their motives. It was because his story was based on this first-hand telling that prompted Huie to boast that his would be "one of the most sensational stories ever published." He wrote,

I have just returned from Sumner where I spent an almost unbelievable day in Whitten's office—with Bryant and Milam. We have reached a verbal agreement on all points; and they have told me the story of the abduction and murder. This was really amazing, for it was the first time they have told the story. . . . Perhaps I am too close to appraise it—but I can't see how it can miss being one of the most sensational stories ever published.³¹

Yet Huie had not simply heard the men's confession; he had purchased it for \$4000 and a promise that he would not publish it as such. Bryant and Milam's lawyers, John Whitten and Jesse Breland, insisted that Huie "avoid any statement that 'you sat down with J.W. Milam and he told you so and so.' . . . Surely you can write your story without so bald an assertion."³² In a letter to Roy Wilkins, in which Huie solicited the NAACP to foot the bill for the confession, he wrote:

I would have to give my personal word to Breland and Whitten that I would not claim that Milam and Bryant had 'confessed;' that I would . . . leave the defendants in a position . . . where they could deny having talked with me—and where the book would not further 'jeopardize' them."³³

This refusal to write the story as a "confession" is a recurrent theme throughout the letters that Huie exchanged with potential publishers and financiers. In a letter to two Chicago newspapermen to whom he was trying to sell the story, Huie wrote:

One point I may not have made clear: this story cannot be published as a 'confession.' It can be presented as my version and your version of the *facts*. I expect to include the most minute details—details which could have been gotten only from a participant in the crime. I'll quote what was said at every stage of the crime. But I will not declare that any participant 'told' me anything.³⁴

This, then, is Huie's bind: the law of the market demanded that his story be a confession, for only a confession could provide the sensationalism necessary to, in his words, "make crime pay"; the law of the land, to the contrary, demanded that his story must leave the killers the option of denying that they had even talked at all.³⁵

Huie kept his promise to Milam and Bryant's lawyers. The "Shocking Story" does not read as a confession—at least as a confession traditionally figured. There are no admissions of wrongdoing, no promises of reformation, and no ethos of guilt or shame.³⁶ More importantly, Huie excised the only portions of the interview in which the killers admitted the killing. Although Huie would later quote Milam as saying "I decided to kill him" and "I shot him," these quotations are conspicuously absent from the "Shocking Story."³⁷ Milam and Bryant's lawyers did, in the end, prevail: Huie could and did write his story without the "bald assertions" of Milam and Bryant that would turn his story into a confession. It is perhaps for these reasons that James Baldwin, after reading Huie's story, insisted that "one cannot refer to [Milam's] performance as a confession."³⁸

Notwithstanding Baldwin's objection, nearly everybody else has followed the judgment of Hicks who, writing in *The Afro-American*, claimed that "in the magazine article [Milam and Bryant] simply confess that they killed Emmett Till."³⁹ That the "Shocking Story" exists in the American imagination as a confession is indisputable: John Edgar Wideman, Bob Dylan, Stokely Carmichael, Christopher Metress, historians Stephen Whitaker and David Beito, rhetoricians Christine Harold and Kevin DeLuca—in short, all the influential accounts of Till's murder, both popular and academic, save James Baldwin, remember the "Shocking Story" as a confession. How is it, then, that despite Huie's excisions and Baldwin's objections, despite the contracts signed and the promises made, despite the intentions of the author,

the killers, and their lawyers, the "Shocking Story" is nearly universally remembered as a confession? How, in other words, did the "Shocking Story" become a confession? Explaining this curious phenomenon entails a brief excursus into the history of public confession and an explanation of the shift in the confessional imagination that took place, in America, in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Emergence of Expressivism

Perhaps the most overlooked fact in the history of public confession is that its two most important practitioners, Augustine and Rousseau, both imagined themselves to be crafting the public confession as a new rhetorical form designed expressly to meet the political exigencies of their times. Their times, of course, were centuries removed, and thus despite their basic agreement on the political centrality of public confession, Augustine and Rousseau developed incommensurable ideas about political flourishing and the place of public confession therein. One of their disagreements is of particular importance for this essay because it marks a shift essential for the emergence of the expressive confession: while Augustine justified the centrality of public confession in communal terms, Rousseau praised public confession in terms of self-expression.

The Confessions of Augustine should not be read simply as a devotional text or the performance of Christian ritual. To read it as such ignores the fact that from start to finish it makes a systematic and coherent argument against the rhetorical practices of the Manicheans. The Manicheans, Augustine writes, "Profess themselves." The indictment of profession as a rhetorical practice is so radical here that it is difficult to overstate, for Augustine argues that it tends to lose its speechful character; indeed, in an important sense it ceases to be speech at all because it eventuates in silence. Writing in Book Seven, Augustine records that the Manicheans were "dumb, yet talking much."⁴⁰ The Manicheans were *loquaces mutos*, silent talkers: their professions, Augustine insisted, resulted always and only in silence. The Manicheans had no way to talk about their sin, and thus no way to conquer transgression. To Augustine's mind, the significance of confession derives from its opposition to the silent and self-defeating rhetorical practices of profession. The *confessio*, then, is not simply a religious form of speech in which sinners acknowledge their transgressions. It is also a political form of speech whose decisive characteristic is its power to render transgression in speech and thus bring it into the realm of politics proper, i.e., the realm of human affairs in which it can be discussed, debated, and thereby disarmed. This, then, is the political promise of public confession: it refuses to allow transgressions the protections of silence which, in Manichean thought, had always been their prerogative.

Although Rousseau was reading Augustine's *Confessions* immediately prior to the composition of his own, he gave the form a new task. Motivated by a deep skepticism of civil society, Rousseau celebrated public confession because he saw in it the capacity to align rhetoric with the voice of nature rather than the conventions of society. Public confession is no longer about the speaking of a once silent transgression, but rather about the expression of the inner self, which functioned for Rousseau as a preserve of natural goodness against the corruption of society.⁴¹ The important point is this: Confession is here subsumed under what Charles Taylor calls expressivism: the moral and epistemic obligation to express one's inner self grounded in the conviction that one's inner self is the source of nature and knowledge.⁴² When this happens, and confession is the voicing of the self rather than the

speaking of transgression, the transgression itself is naturalized because it functions only as an expression of, and an index to, the natural self within. In sum, while Augustine understood confession as a politicizing of *actions* or *deeds*, Rousseau put the same rhetorical form in the service of articulating the self and naturalizing its deeds.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that the Rousseauian ideal of confession-as-expressivism has eclipsed the Augustinian ideal of confession is the revised status of Augustine vis-à-vis the development of confession. Once heralded by Northrop Frye as the "inventor" of the confession, David P. Terry, in a recent issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, argues that Augustine's *Confessions* does not count as "confessional discourse."⁴³ The reason for this disqualification is important. Drawing on Phillip Lopate, Terry argues that Augustine's *Confessions* lacks "the sense of 'eavesdropping on the mind in solitude' that is one hallmark of confessional discourse."⁴⁴ That is to say, Augustine's *Confessions* is disqualified because it is unrecognizable in terms of the eighteenth-century ideal that would posit self-expression as the "hallmark" of confessional discourse.

Terry's disqualification of Augustine is hardly anomalous. In *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks also disqualifies Augustine, writing that there is "no moment in [Augustine's] *Confessions* that records the practice of confession as we have come to know it." Not surprisingly, Augustine's place is given to Rousseau, whom Brooks describes as "the symbolic fountainhead" of the modern "confessional imagination." Brooks makes the point that it is Rousseau's *Confessions* "which will bring us up to the modern sensibility." And, again not surprisingly, this sensibility defines confession in terms of self-expression. Rousseau, Brooks writes, was instrumental in making "the confessional mode a crucial kind of self-expression."⁴⁵

With confession so defined, we should not be surprised that the "Shocking Story" was so widely understood as a confession. For although Huie's story did not contain "bald assertions" of wrongdoing, it did provide access to the killers' motives and it provided "details which could have been gotten only from a participant in the crime"—and under the aegis of expressivism these are the "hallmarks" of the confessional imagination.

Expressivism in mid-Twentieth-Century America

Understanding how the "Shocking Story" became a confession, however, requires something more than a recognition of the fundamental shift effected by Rousseau. It requires also an understanding of the particular manifestations of that shift in mid-twentieth-century America. Without question, the single most important influence on the confessional imagination in the early years of the twentieth century was the emergence of the confession magazine. As Roseann M. Mandziuk explains, confession magazines such as Bernarr MacFadden's *True Story* experienced "phenomenal levels of success, reaching unprecedented numbers of readers who gladly paid twenty cents for it each month, twice as much as the price of other magazines at the time."⁴⁶ The startling rise of these mass-marketed confessions served to establish self-expression as the "hallmark of confessional discourse" within the confessional imagination. In an oft-cited article entitled "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," George Gerbner explains that the confession is a "manner of telling" in which everything—"events,

facts, ideas"—is "personalized" and narrated in the first person. The essential marker of the confession is here self-disclosure, and, anticipating Terry by forty-eight years, Gerbner uses the metaphor of "eavesdropping" to emphasize its essential characteristic: "In effect, the reader of one of these stories is being invited to eavesdrop or peep on a very personal scene which would otherwise be hidden."⁴⁷

This personalization is hardly innocent, for as "events, facts, and ideas" are personalized they are also dehistoricized. Quoting an unpublished study by Wilbur Schramm, Gerbner explains that although confessions might mention transgressive deeds, "the impression is given . . . that this is the pattern of a behavioristic universe; *this is how society works; this is the law of human behavior.*"⁴⁸ As we saw with Rousseau, the expressive confession naturalizes historical events by suggesting that they are not a product of human speech or action, but only an indication of "how society works." The modern confession, Gerbner concludes, is a rhetorical form marked by tragic resignation: it produces passivity by positing a world in which transgression is natural, social protest "irrelevant," and rhetoric powerless as a drive wheel for social change.⁴⁹

The "Shocking Story," of course, was published in *Look* magazine in the 1950s and thus might be distinguished both generically and chronologically from the heyday of confession magazines. Yet there are two reasons for suspecting that the ideals of the confession magazine informed Huie's work and, in part, explain the curious remembrance of the story as a confession. First, it is important to note that Huie was no stranger to the world of confession magazines and the particular understanding of confession they entailed. In fact, as an upstart journalist he sold his first publication to MacFadden's *True Story* and, in a 1974 *Writer's Digest* interview, described himself as "essentially a magazine writer."⁵⁰ Second, *Look* inherited a readership and a style from the confession magazines. As Cara Finnegan has noted, *Look*—like the confession magazines, but unlike its competitor *Life*—was published cheaply, designed for a working class readership, and branded as "sensationalist."⁵¹ Even the content of *Look* mirrored the confession magazines; Finnegan reports that the magazine focused on "areas of human interest" such as "personalities, romance, beauty and fashion." Given the stylistic and editorial similarities between *Look* and the confession magazines, it is perhaps not surprising that Finnegan describes *Look* as "curiously ahistorical." Indeed, "bound by its own ahistorical perspective," Finnegan argues, "*Look* favors the construction of a universal narrative over the engagement of the politics of the day."⁵² For the purposes of my argument, we need not insist upon a causal relationship between Rousseau's redefinition of confession and the antipolitics of *Look*, we need only note the similarities: *Look*, like Rousseau's expressivism and MacFadden's magazine industry, naturalized historical events.

The "Shocking Story," then, was written by a "magazine writer;" published in an organ that imitated the editorial style, production standards, and political orientation of the once-vibrant confession magazine industry; and, above all, was submitted to a culture in which Rousseau stands as the "symbolic fountainhead" of the confessional imagination. Given this confluence of historical and ideological factors, it should not be surprising that the "Shocking Story" became a confession. After all, by the 1950s expressivism had taken such a hold of the confessional imagination that Milam's admissions of wrongdoing—"I decided to kill him" and "I shot him"—provided no reason not to read the "Shocking Story" as a confession. Indeed, Milam's admissions of misdeeds are, by the reigning

expressive standards, decidedly extra-confessive, unrelated to the central confessional project of self-expression.

The Politics of Expressivism

It is the argument of this essay that the political promise of public confession is undermined by the logic of expressivism that dominates Rousseau's work and has come to inhabit the American confessional imagination. It is in this context that Foucault's critique of confession is relevant. Given our disciplinary penchant to cite Foucault as *the* decisive theorist of confession, it is important to recall that when Foucault decries confession as a technology of social control he is talking about one particular form of confession: confession as self-expression. Foucault explains that confession is not the articulation of "your acts" or "faults" as it was for Augustine, but rather articulation and interpretation of the inner self.⁵³ In other words, the shift I have been at pains to mark in the confessional imagination is itself the condition of Foucault's critique.

Foucault's analysis is driven by the tension between the confessive ideal of self-expression and the fact that the "self" is elusive. Foucault describes the self that would be disclosed in terms that emphasize its elusiveness: "the nearly imperceptible movements of the thoughts," the "mysteries of the heart," or the "barely discernable traces of desire."⁵⁴ The work of confession is to churn these elusive bodily impulses through the "mills of speech" in order to domesticate them, abstract them, and interpret them as evidence of a unified self.⁵⁵ This unified self, however, will always be a fiction because the elusive and "prediscursive" movements of the body do not, Foucault insists, lend themselves to being grouped under a single coherent label as if they each contributed, without dissent, to a stable and unified self.⁵⁶ The reason, Foucault explains, is this: there is "nothing in man—not even his body—[that] is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition."⁵⁷ In the act of confession, then, the particularities of the body are not so much interpreted as they are ignored, forced into the service of a unified self that their heterogeneity disclaims. Confession, then, like all metaphysical moves, is a "denial of the body" and is thus a central technology by which "Europeans no longer know themselves."⁵⁸

Thus, just as confession-as-self-expression is, in the work of Rousseau, a technology for obscuring the political and rhetorical character of historical events, it is, for Foucault, a technology for obscuring the historical and political character of the body. In both cases, the distinctive power of confession-as-expressivism resides in its capacity to obscure the political character of the historical; it justifies and explains the misdeeds of history—and the materials of the body—by covering them over with dehistoricized abstractions.

And this also is the power of the "Shocking Story." Huie, I suggest, draws on the resources of expressivism to negotiate the competing demands of the killers' lawyers and the bottom line. If he could not publish the story as a confession in the old-fashioned sense of the term—which would entail "bald assertions" and admissions of wrong-doing—he did, at least, have recourse to the American confessional imagination that by the 1950s understood confession on expressive terms. It remains now to explain with more precision how the "Shocking Story" dehistoricized Till's murder and thereby assured its own circulation. A close reading of the "Shocking Story" reveals that it idealizes a rhetorical

ventriloquism whereby speech is distanced from the speaking subject as the highest rhetorical ideal. This ideal is evident both in the content and form of the story. Regarding the content, it is important to note that the "Shocking Story" tells the story of the repeated attempts of J.W. Milam to forcibly align the defiant speech of Emmett Till with the cultural norms of the Jim Crow south. In this sense, the "Shocking Story" recounts Milam's effort to ventriloquize Till, to reduce his speech to the linguistic rehearsal of the status quo. Regarding the form of the story, the ventriloquism that Milam tried to enforce on Till is itself enacted in the telling of the "Shocking Story" and is the definitive marker of the expressive confession.

Consider first the specifics of Huie's story. Huie described a society in which the resources of rhetoric are legitimate only to the extent that they are deployed wholly in the service of cultural normativity. In such a society, rhetorical interventions that arraign cultural norms are quickly silenced. To make this point, the "Shocking Story" writes Emmett Till as a protagonist whose decisive characteristic was neither his race nor his sexual prowess, but rather his defiant speech. Before Till even whistled at Carolyn Bryant, Huie reminds us, his first offense was simply to speak to her: "How about a date, Baby." Lest his readers miss the significance of the men's decision to come after the "talker," Huie later made the point explicit: "They had come to chastise him, not for *grabbing*, but only for what he *said*: for asking her 'for a date.'"⁵⁹ When the "Shocking Story" is read according to these thematics, the incessant speech of Till and Milam's repeated attempts to silence him, it becomes clear that the "Shocking Story" is not simply one more recounting of Till's untimely death, it is also a treatise about the role of speech in Delta violence. The regrettable lesson of the "Shocking Story" is that the violence of the Mississippi Delta is deployed against those whose speech destabilizes cultural norms. For, as Huie notes, "one doesn't explain taboos; or challenge them; or even discuss them."⁶⁰ The power of the taboo thus depends on the elimination of rhetorical interventions and when Milam killed Till, Huie explains, he was simply "enforcing" Southern cultural norms. Milam was the "taboo enforcer."⁶¹

In the "Shocking Story" Huie records that when Milam entered the boys' room he shone his flashlight in Till's eyes and asked: "You the nigger who did the talking?" "Yeah," Bobo replied. "Milam: 'Don't say, 'Yeah' to me: I'll blow your head off.'"⁶² This initial exchange between Till and Milam is paradigmatic of the entire "Shocking Story" and it is important because it demonstrates the intolerance of the Jim Crow south for practices of speech that would challenge cultural norms. When Milam came to silence the "Chicago talker" he was not seeking quietude, but rather a form of discourse that respected and reinforced the assumed status differential that, according to the still-operative Jim Crow logic, separated him from this black, promiscuous, boy. Milam wanted, in other words, a ventriloquistic form of discourse that was reducible to, and indistinguishable from, prevailing conventions. For it is the essence of ventriloquism that the privilege of invention is remanded to a source other than the speaking subject. And it is precisely this critical distance that ventriloquism interposes between the particular historical speaker and that speaker's rhetorical performance that accounts for what Eric King Watt's refers to as the voicelessness of ventriloquism. In our context, then, Milam wanted not so much to quiet the talkative Till, but to ventriloquize his speech and thereby turn it from the work of defiance to the dissemination of cultural platitudes. For Milam knew as well as Watts that ventriloquism, just as much as quietude, was a form of voicelessness. The saying of "sir," in such a context, would be for Till

not simply a change in idiom, but a retreat from the vocative powers of speech which, as Watts explains, are activated only when an orator challenges the social order rather than ventriloquistically repeats it.⁶³

Till's refusal to speak respectfully to Milam and Bryant reached its climax several hours later in Milam's shed. Milam recalls that they "marched the nigger in the tool house and I whacked him a few times over the head with the gun."⁶⁴ Apart from the fact that "whacking" severely understates the brutality of what they did to Till in that shed, it is important to understand that Milam understood this "whacking" as a means of disciplining Till's speech, or more accurately, a means of extracting a particular (ventriloquistic) form of speech, a form marked by "Yes Sirs" and a deference which recognized Milam's superior social station. Huie records that, between blows, Milam stopped beating Till just long enough to ask: "You still as good as I am?"

The "whacking" didn't work. Till responded to Milam's question with a defiant "yeah" and the violence of the entire episode is punctuated only by Till's refusal to say "sir." Huie would explain years later:

With each blow Bobo is on the verge of collapsing and begging for mercy—which would save his life. But he can't do it. He has not only survived to this point, but he has tasted the satisfaction of striking back—with his taunts. With each taunt he gains strength, determination. Big [Milam] throws the light on Bobo's face. Bobo remains on his knees; his head is battered; but he decides to strike another blow—with a taunt.⁶⁵

Till would simply not retreat from the powers of the voice. Huie records Milam's shock at the inefficacy of the torture: "And now this is hard to believe . . . I never thought I'd see it . . . but that black bastard never even whimpered. He just stood there and poison run out of his mouth."⁶⁶ Milam here distinguishes between two modes of speech: whimpered speech and poisoned speech. The whimper is what Milam expected, it is marked by "sirs" instead of "yeahs," and, because it is reducible to societal norms, it is, politically speaking, silent. The "whimper," we might say, is defined by ventriloquism and, as Watts reminds us, can be articulated only *sotto voce*. Poisoned speech, by contrast, is what Milam received; it is the full-voiced taunt, it is, politically, a powerful form of speech precisely because it refuses to take cues from the society in which it sounds, and it is, as Huie wrote in the "Shocking Story," the perfect speech "to ensure [Till's] martyrdom." More than four hours after his abduction, Till's poisoned speech culminates in this declaration: "You bastards, I'm not afraid of you. I'm as good as you are. I've 'had' white women. My grandmother was a white woman."⁶⁷

Immediately following this defiant announcement, which Huie explicitly frames as an example of poisoned speech, Huie provides a paragraph-length quotation in which Milam reflects on the murder in the past tense and in which he admits that he was "likely to kill" any black boy who "mentioned" sex with a white woman. I quote it here in its entirety:

Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government.

They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we've got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you, I'm going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'⁶⁸

Milam here serves "notice" that disruptive speech will not be tolerated. It is Till's insistent and poisoned speech, Milam tells us, that ultimately earns him his lynching. It is here important to emphasize that Milam confesses to killing Till for "mentioning" a cultural taboo and letting "poison run out of his mouth." The killing of Till, then, is Milam's final and finally-successful attempt to silence the "Chicago talker." If he could not ventriloquize Till's speech he could, by killing him, render him mute. In the "Shocking Story," then, the vocative powers of speech die with Till, for although Milam is always talking, his words are fundamentally voiceless: they ring hollow and sound empty precisely because they are simply giving expression to the status quo and thereby "enforcing" cultural taboos. The rhetorical ideal at the heart of the "Shocking Story," then, is a form of speech—ventriloquism—that functions to obscure the historicity of its own discursive objects by disjoining invention and performance and thus disclaiming the agency that animates it.

This ventriloquized rhetorical ideal, described by Milam as a "whimper," is also the decisive characteristic of the expressive confession. If the content of the "Shocking Story" describes this ideal, its form enacts it: the "Shocking Story" distances Milam from his own disclosures. Consider again Milam's "notice." The very fact that Milam understood his confession as a "notice" to "everyone" regarding the politics of "me and my folks" is important in this regard. Milam posits an indefinite addressee ("everyone") and, perhaps more surprisingly, he suggests that his confession will disclose not simply his own thoughts, but those of his whole community (the twice-mentioned "me and my folks"). Michael Warner helps us understand that these two rhetorical moves are not unrelated; both constitute the confession as *public* discourse and help to ensure its circulation. Warner suggests that the first move—the indefinite addressee—indicates the "reflexive circulation" of the "Shocking Story." It was, in other words, a story written for mass circulation.⁶⁹ The second move—Milam's insistence that his confession discloses the attitude of an entire community—ensures the success of the first. For, Warner explains, one condition of public circulation is the interchangeability of the speaking subject. Foucault agrees; he argues that the greater the distance between a speaker and a discourse the more freely it will circulate.⁷⁰ Milam's confession, in other words, will circulate precisely as it is understood that it could have been anyone confessing; its circulation is a function of the distance that the expressive confession interposed between Milam and the "Shocking Story."⁷¹ Milam's double claim to speak for "me and my folks," then, is a form of distancing his self from the confession—indeed negating the particularities of his self—in order that the confession might circulate among "everyone."⁷²

In *Letters of the Republic*, Warner refers to the negativity of the public speaker as an act of "ventriloquism" in which one's words are projected onto the fiction of an abstracted self.⁷³ In the "Shocking Story," the descriptions of Till's bravado and his subsequent lynching are projected onto the fiction of the abstract subject "me and my folks." Yet, and this is the point, abstraction is a "differential

resource." Only the normal can be abstracted; the particular, the historical, and the idiosyncratic cannot. Warner explains that "abstraction . . . provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal."⁷⁴ As Foucault puts it, in the distancing of abstraction, the "subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality."⁷⁵ For the murder to be remanded, then, not to Milam, but to the abstracted "me and my folks," requires that it be universalized, stripped of its particulars. Warner here lends a certain eloquence: "Publicness is always able to encode itself through the themes of universality, openness, meritocracy, and access, *all of which derhetorize its self-understanding*, guaranteeing at every step that difference will be enunciated as mere positivity."⁷⁶ Milam's ventriloquism, then, reduces the fact of his unique complicity in the death of Emmett Till to a "mere positivity," an unimportant particularity lost in the normality of the murder. And here it is worth emphasizing that the circulation of the "Shocking Story" is ensured in the same derhetorizing movement that occludes Milam's decisive role in the murder; this is the politics of circulation.

The power of the expressive confession to naturalize its own discursive objects, then, might be said to inhere in the distancing of ventriloquism. By distancing Till from his taunts and Milam from his confession, the "Shocking Story" sought to tell the story of the murder without "bald assertions" of agency. And when the story is so told, it becomes all too easy to interpret the "Shocking Story" as a confession without a culpable confessant. And, indeed, the long after-life of the "Shocking Story" bears this out. When, in 1960, Huie rewrote his "Shocking Story" as a screenplay for a United Artists picture in which Gregory Peck was to star, he explained the murder with recourse to blood lines—perhaps the quintessential topos of naturalized politics. Huie explains the significance of the screenplay's opening scene:

This whole scene must make clear how, though heredity and experience, these white men are equipped for violence. . . . They are born with guns in their hands They are capable of violence with each other, and particularly with what they call 'nigger trouble-makers.'⁷⁷

Moreover, Huie explains that the opening scenes must also "demonstrate that Delta Negroes, in poverty, are as prone to violence as are the [white people]."⁷⁸ In Huie's staging of Emmett Till, then, the violence is natural and therefore inevitable; the murder is the result of blood lines, poverty, and the sheer experience of a biracial society. Gregory Peck and his colleagues remain the only relevant actors, for the force of history has turned the actors of the "Shocking Story"—J.W. Milam no less than Emmett Till—into subjects of a naturalized history and blood. To emphasize the extent to which the would-be actors in the story are subject to the inevitability of historical necessity, Huie insists that Milam and Bryant be presented as "spectators" in the tragedy of Emmett Till. And if Milam and Bryant are spectators, how much more are those on the voyeur's side of the big screen. Indeed, perhaps the most disquieting aspect of the "Shocking Story" is that by remanding the murder to the poverty of "Delta Negroes" and the bloodlines of "these [southern] white men," it distances not only the speaker from the confession, but it also distances its readership-become-viewership from complicity in the society that murdered Emmett Till.

Conclusion: Expressivism, Politics, and Baldwin

The widespread reception of the "Shocking Story" as a confession, no less than the remarkable power of that story, commends expressivism to our attention as a distinct form of public confession. Perhaps the most important marker of that form, as I have tried to indicate, is its capacity to dehistoricize its own discursive objects. This function can be understood as the effect of a robust rhetorical ventriloquism that encompasses the emphases of both Watts and Warner. In Watt's sense of the term, the expressive confession is ventriloquistic because it is simply an articulation of prevailing cultural norms; the expressive confession contains no challenge to the status quo by which it might be endowed with voice. In Warner's sense of the term, the expressive confession is ventriloquistic because it remands the misdeeds described to unmarked actors whose particularities are never more than instances of generalized norms.

And here it may be worth remembering that Foucault's argument against confession in *The History of Sexuality* is precisely that it turns the historical particularities of the body into the abstractions of the self. Thus he notes that the abstraction "sexuality" starts from the false conviction that "their exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures."⁷⁹ Foucault refers to this movement beyond the historical particularity of the body as the "substitution of sex for blood," an abstraction for a particular.⁸⁰ And, importantly, the abstraction involved in confession is what makes it an instrument of domination. In a deeply Nietzschean logic, Foucault reasons that once the inarticulate body has been abstracted, power latches onto the abstraction as a "target" and point of application.⁸¹ And this, for Foucault, is a matter of history; once the particularity of the body was abstracted into the "general category" of sexuality, power developed multiple strategies for controlling sexuality.⁸² It is for this reason that Warner refers to abstraction as a "minoritizing" political logic.⁸³ And it is also for this reason that we should be wary of any form of discourse such as the expressive confession that occludes historical particulars and foregrounds generalized abstractions.

I want to conclude by returning to James Baldwin, who, recall, stands nearly alone in his insistence that the "Shocking Story" does not count as a confession. Baldwin explains this disqualification in "Notes for Blues," the introduction to his play based "distantly" on the murder of Emmett Till, *Blues for Mister Charlie*. In the "Notes," Baldwin argues that Milam's story is best understood as a "recount[ing]" rather than a "confession." He then offers a political rationale for "recounting":

The crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, *compulsively repeats his crimes*, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe.⁸⁴

The violence of Till's murder, in other words, is of such a scale that it defies confession, or any form of speech that might entail "acceptance." Thus Baldwin accuses his "country" and "countrymen" of ignorance: "they are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."⁸⁵ As a means "protecting himself" and preserving this ignorance—which is itself, Baldwin

cries, the grossest crime—his “countrymen” deploy a specific rhetorical form: the compulsive repetition of crime, the Milam-like recounting of facts.⁸⁶

While recounting may preserve an unwarranted innocence, it does so by “fleeing from reality” into an indescribable “spiritual darkness.”⁸⁷ In order to cease this flight from reality, and in an attempt to change reality, Baldwin retold the story of Emmett Till.⁸⁸ And, as he retold it, he did not simply recount the facts as if they were inevitable; rather, he re-emplotted the murder as the contingent result of historical actors. And in this sense Baldwin’s retelling recalls an Augustinian tradition of public confession in which the task of the form was to cast transgressions as the misdeeds of historical actors. To be sure, Baldwin’s Milam is no monster; Baldwin presents Milam with some measure of compassion—the blues are, after all, for Mister Charlie, for white people. Milam is still, for Baldwin as for Huie, in some senses a victim of cultural forces. The decisive difference is this: Baldwin’s Milam, although he may be a victim, he is in no sense a spectator—he is responsible for his culture as much as he is a victim of it. And it is precisely because Baldwin refuses to grant Milam, or anyone else, the option of disengaged spectatorship that Richard Rorty gives him a titular place in *Achieving Our Country*. Borrowing eloquence from Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, Rorty argues that the achievement of our country hinges on the distinction between “spectators” who “leave the fate of the United States to the operation of nonhuman forces” and those who decide “to be an agent.”⁸⁹ Both Baldwin and Rorty, unlike Huie, believe that democracy requires discursive practices that emphasize agential politics rather than naturalized spectatorship.

In this sense it is possible to read Baldwin’s rejection of Milam’s “recounting” as a comment on the politics of public confession. When, in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin wrote that color is a political rather than a human reality, he was underscoring the sense in which the stories of race relations, even the shocking ones, must be told in political rather than natural terms.⁹⁰ And, when he claimed that Huie’s account of Milam’s disclosures do not count as confessions, he meant that public confessions, if they are to be viable in a democratic society, must not naturalize the transgressions they disclose.

Notes

¹ William Bradford Huie, *Wolf Whistle and Other Stories* (New York: Signet Books / The New American Library, 1959), 20.

² "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth," *Jet*, September 15, 1955, 8. The wide ranging impact of *Jet's* decision to publish the photographs of the beaten Emmett Till was the subject of a report by Noah Adams on NPR's *Morning Edition*. Noah Adams, "Emmett Till and the Impact of Images: Photos of Murdered Youth Spurred Civil Rights Activism" (MP3 audio file), 8 min., 58 sec.; from National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, June 23, 2004, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1969702>. Olive Arnold Adams claims that the murder of Emmett Till "put Money on the front pages of newspapers all over the world, and on the lips of every newscaster." Olive Arnold Adams, *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till* (New York: The Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership, 1956), 12. Christopher Metress documents the various reactions of the foreign press. Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 138-42.

³ 1961, 1972, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1984, and 2001.

⁴ The list could go on. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Mrs. Medgar Evers, Langston Hughes, and Eldridge Cleaver are among the scores of Americans who worked to ensure the circulation of Till's story. For an almost-complete listing of the ways the story of Emmett Till has been taken up and circulated, see Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till*.

⁵ On the instrumentality of Beauchamp's work, Davis W. Houck and Mathew A. Grindy write, "So compelling was his evidence that the Justice Department, with the cooperation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), announced in May 2004 that the case would be reopened." Davis

W. Houck and Mathew A. Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 5. Although the FBI announced in March of 2006 that there would be no new federal charges levied, the reinvestigation has not been without consequence: in September of 2005 the Senate passed the "Till Bill," creating a federal unit dedicated to the reexamination of civil rights trials. See Houck and Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*, 156.

⁶ For a careful review of Till's trial see Hugh Steven Whitaker, "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 189-224. There are two excellent rhetorical analyses of the Till newspaper coverage: Davis W. Houck, "Killing Emmett," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 225-62 and Maegan Parker, "Recognizing Regression: Coming to *Terms* with the Death of Emmett Till," Paper presented at the Rhetoric Society of America, Memphis, TN, May 26-29, 2006. On the role of the tortured and pictured black body see Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 263-86. For Houck's description of Till as the "moral warrant" for the civil rights movement see "From Money to Montgomery: Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, and the Freedom Movement, 1955-2005," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 175.

⁷ William Bradford Huie to Basil Walters and Lee Hills, 18 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction, The Ohio State University Libraries (emphasis original).

⁸ Literary scholar Christopher Metress argues that "Huie's version of events [was] the most widely distributed." Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till*, 208.

⁹ David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, "Why It's Unlikely the Emmett Till Murder Mystery Will Ever be Solved," *History News Network: Because the Past is the Present, and the Future Too*, April 26, 2004, <http://hnn.us/articles/4853.html>.

¹⁰ See Harold and DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse," 265-66.

¹¹ Christine Harold and Kevin DeLuca question the facticity of the "Shocking Story," Hugh Stephen Whitaker accuses Huie of sensationalism, Paul Hendrickson notes that Huie's is just one of many stories telling of Till's last night, and Davis Houck characterizes the "Shocking Story" as a "creative and appalling fiction." See Harold and DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse," 270-271; Whitaker, "A Case Study in Southern Justice," 195; Paul Hendrickson, "Mississippi Haunting," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 180; Houck, "Killing Emmett," 255. This reading of the "Shocking Story" continues in Davis Houck and Mathew Grindy's recent *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*, in which they characterize the story as "fantastic and southern." Houck and Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*, 151.

¹² In fact, Huie wrote that he would "refuse to testify as to sources or how I came by the truth." Huie to Walters and Hills, 18 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction. The emphasis on the secrecy of his informants is a leit-motif that runs throughout Huie's letters. In the same letter to the Chicago newspaperman, Basil Waters, Huie promised that he would "protect the defendants by keeping 'secret' the matter of their cooperation with me, by not testifying against them, and by not writing the story in a manner in which it could be used as a confession." (ibid., emphasis original).

¹³ William Bradford Huie to Dan Mich, 17 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction, The Ohio State University Libraries.

¹⁴ Huie paid Milam and Bryant's lawyers an advance of \$1260 as well as ten-percent of the net profits of the story for arranging a secret rendezvous in which the killers could tell their story.

William Bradford Huie to Dan Mich, 23 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction, The Ohio State University Libraries.

¹⁵ William M. Simpson, "Reflections on a Murder: The Emmett Till Case," in *Southern Miscellany: Essays in History in Honor of Glover Moore*, ed. Frank Allen Dennis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 198.

¹⁶ "Ask New Till Probe," *Philadelphia Afro-American*, January 21, 1956.

¹⁷ Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁸ Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 144.

¹⁹ For the above formulation I am indebted to Marc J. LaFountain, "Foucault and Dr. Ruth," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 6 (1989): 125. LaFountain, in turn, borrows his formulation from Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

²⁰ The notion of "distance" between a discourse and its speaker I borrow from Foucault. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 112. Ventriloquism is, rhetorically speaking, a function of this distance. Eric King Watts and Michael Warner talk explicitly about the politics of ventriloquism. See Eric King Watts, "'Voice' and 'Voicelessness' in Rhetorical Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 2 (2001): 179-96; Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 87.

²¹ "Murder thus demands that a community come to terms with the crime—confront what has happened and endeavor to explain it." Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1-2.

²² James L. Hicks, "Sheriff Kept Key Witness Hid in Jail During Trial," *Cleveland Call and Post*, October, 8 1955.

²³ Ernest C. Withers, *Complete Photo Story of the Emmett Till Murder Case* (Memphis: Withers Photographers, 1955). I studied the book online in 2006 via the Library website of the University of Mississippi. The text is no longer available online.

²⁴ Adams, *Time Bomb*, 9, 17.

²⁵ Ethel Payne, "Mamie Bradley's Untold Story: Installment VIII," *Chicago Defender*, June 9, 1956.

²⁶ "Dr. Howard to Tell of Mississippi Story," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 22, 1956.

²⁷ On the Baltimore speech, see "Terror Reigns in Mississippi: The Address of Dr. T. R. Howard," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, October 8, 1955. For a review of the lecture circuit nationwide, and for numbers on the speeches in Detroit and Chicago (and a different New York meeting) see "Lynch Case Verdict Stirs the Whole Nation," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, October 8, 1955. For the New York speech referred to above, see "Mass Meet: Crowd Bitter, Sad, Sullen," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 1, 1955. For the Cleveland speech, see Marty Richardson, "Clevelanders Rally Behind Mother of Lynching Victim," *Cleveland Call and Post*, September 24, 1955.

²⁸ Editorial, "Death in Mississippi," *Commonweal*, September 23, 1955, 603; Harold and DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse, 265, 267.

²⁹ Houck, "Killing Emmett," 228.

³⁰ Huie, *Wolf*, 32.

³¹ Huie to Mich, 23 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction.

³² John Whitten to William Bradford Huie, 27 September 1956. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction, The Ohio State University Libraries.

³³ Huie to Wilkins, 12 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction.

³⁴ Huie to Walters and Hills, 18 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction (emphasis original).

³⁵ Huie to Walters and Hills, 18 October 1955. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction.

³⁶ David Terry argues that "we tend to associate confession with feelings of guilt or shame." David P. Terry, "Once Blind, Now Seeing: Problematics of Confessional Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2006): 210. Terry is hardly alone. Sharon Downey writes that, in confession, "one sought forgiveness for past transgressions and appealed for divine intervention in the future." Sharon Downey, "The Evolution of the Rhetorical Genre of Apologia," *Western Journal of Communication* 57 (1993): 49.

³⁷ Huie, *Wolf*, 37, 38.

³⁸ James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), xiv.

³⁹ James L. Hicks, "Writer Challenges Brownell to Act in Till Kidnap-Murder Case," *The Afro-American*, January 21, 1956.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John Kenneth Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 7.2.3.

⁴¹ "The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 270.

⁴² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 368-90.

⁴³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 307.

⁴⁴ Terry, "Once Blind, Now Seeing," 213.

⁴⁵ Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, 92, 18, 103, and 18.

⁴⁶ Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires: Power and Please in *True Story* Magazine," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001): 178.

⁴⁷ George Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," *Social Problems* 6, no. 1 (1958): 34, 36. In the second quotation, Gerbner is quoting an unpublished study done by Wilbur Schramm of The University of Illinois' Institute for Communication Research.

⁴⁸ Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 38 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 40, 32.

⁵⁰ Bob Ward, "William Bradford Huie Paid for Their Sins," *Writer's Digest* 54 (1974): 16.

⁵¹ Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 177-79. Confession magazines, it has been widely noted, were produced for—and productive of—a female and working class subjectivity. They were designed for what the *Saturday Evening Post* would call "MacFadden's anonymous amateur illiterates" (Gerbner, "Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 29) and were conspicuously set against the genteel literary magazines such as *Colliers* or *The Ladies' Home Journal*. See Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine;" Regina Kunzel, "Pulp Fictions and Problem Girls: Reading and Rewriting Single Pregnancy in the Postwar United States," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1465-87; Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desire;"

and Maureen Honey, "The Confession Formula and Fantasies of Empowerment," *Women's Studies* 10 (1984): 303-320.

⁵² Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty*, 181-2, 203, 214-15.

⁵³ Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 219. It is no exaggeration to say that Foucault dominates the literature on the politics of confession. Anne Hartman writes, "Foucault's model of confession has dominated critical conversation so thoroughly that it is difficult to conceptualize confession in other terms." Anne Hartman, "Confession as Cultural Form: The Plymouth Inquiry," *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2005), 537. Within Communication Studies broadly conceived, see Bonnie J. Dow, "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001): 123-40; Roseann M. Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 190; LaFountain, "Foucault and Dr. Ruth" ; Alice Templeton, "The Confessing Animal in Sex, Lies, and Videotape," *Journal of Film and Video* 50, no. 2 (1998): 15-25; and Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, "Change Your Life! Confession and Conversion in Telemundo's *Cambia Tu Vida*," *Mass Communication & Society* 6, no. 2 (2003): 137-59. Outside of communication studies, Foucault still dominates. In Cultural Studies see Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject, Cultural Politics* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1990); in Sociology see Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1982); and in critical-legal theory, see Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*.

⁵⁴ Foucault, "About the Beginning," 217; Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage 1990), 92, 89. Foucault understands confession as a

"hermeneutics of the self" ("About the Beginning," 203-04) and it is this concept he is developing in the above citations from *The Use of Pleasure*.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 21.

⁵⁶ To the best of my knowledge, Foucault never uses the word "prediscursive" to describe the inner movements of the soul that confession interprets. But I still like it. The word was significant much earlier in Foucault's career, especially in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where he uses it as part of his argument that "madness" is produced. He claims that the designation of a particular person as "mad" requires a particular interpretation of "prediscursive experiences." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 47.

⁵⁷ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 153.

See also Carole Blair and Martha Cooper, "The Humanist Turn in Foucault's Rhetoric of Inquiry," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 162.

⁵⁸ Foucault, "Nietzsche," 156, 159. See also: "[Y]ou will become the subject of the manifestation of truth when and only when you disappear or you destroy yourself as a real body or as a real existence." Foucault, "About the Beginning," 221.

⁵⁹ Huie, *Wolf*, 24 (emphasis original).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 22, 13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

⁶² "William Bradford Huie, 'The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,'" *Look*, January 24, 1956, 48. I include the term "nigger" in this quotation with much trepidation. While

I am disgusted by the hatred and the history of oppression recorded and effected by the term, I nonetheless use the term in this and following quotations. I do so not only as a matter of historical fidelity, but also because my work in rhetorical history is motivated by the need to fight the hatred which the term registers. On the history and politics of the term, see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

⁶³ Watts argues that it is the ethical "challenge" to the status quo that "invigorates voice." Thus, he reasons, voice is endowed between the "polarized constraints of muteness and ventriloquism," for neither quiet muteness nor a ventriloquistic rehearsal of the status quo has the capacity to "challenge" society and "invigorate voice." Watts, "'Voice' and 'Voicelessness' in Rhetorical Studies," 179-96. Elsewhere, Watts argue that "voice" depends on thinking outside of "dominant cultural perspective on 'truth.'" Eric King Watts, "Cultivating a Black Public Voice: W.E.B. Du Bois and the 'Criteria of Negro Art,'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2001): 181-201. In both cases, the capacities of voice are opposed to the ventriloquistic rehearsal of cultural values.

⁶⁴ Huie, *Wolf*, 35.

⁶⁵ William Bradford Huie, *Wolf Whistle*, produced Louis de Rochemont (New York: United Artists Release, 1960), 47. Louis de Rochemont Associates, Inc., 380 Madison Ave, NYC. May 21, 1960. The William Charvat Collection of American Fiction, The Ohio State University Libraries. Because Huie entitled a book and a screenplay *Wolf Whistle*, I distinguish the screenplay hereafter by noting that it was produced by United Artists.

⁶⁶ Huie, *Wolf*, 36.

⁶⁷ Huie, "Shocking," 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Warner describes "reflexive circulation": "I don't just speak to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public." Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 95.

⁷⁰ Foucault, "What is an Author?" 119.

⁷¹ This observation is central to a great deal of Warner's work. In *Letters of the Republic*, he refers to this as the "principle of negativity." Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 42. Warner explains the principle of negativity as such: "What you say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are." Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 165. And Warner is insistent that the "principle of negativity" that he developed in his study of eighteenth-century America is still operational: "the bourgeois public sphere continues to secure a minoritizing liberal logic of self-abstraction" (Ibid., 169).

⁷² Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, Warner describes the interchangeability of the speaking subject as the "negativity" of the speaker. Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 42.

⁷³ Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 87.

⁷⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 167.

⁷⁵ Foucault, "What is an Author?" 102.

⁷⁶ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 167 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁷ Huie, *Wolf Whistle* (United Artists), 19.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:152-3.

⁸⁰ It is important to note that by "sexuality" Foucault is not referring to particular actions, functions, parts, or combinations. He is referring to a "domain" or "field of truth" constituted by

the discourses of sexuality. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:68-69. "Sex" in this sense is comparable to Foucault's notion of the Christian soul, a fiction created through discourse that controls us. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 29.

⁸¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:147-8. Nietzsche is perhaps the clearest on the "control of abstractions": "For something is possible in the realm of these schemata [abstractions] which could never be achieved with the vivid first impressions: the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries." Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed., ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 1171-79 (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001). This process is entirely consistent with Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* where Foucault claims that once a prisoner has been objectified (abstracted from particularity) power "made of this description a means of control and a method of domination." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 190-1.

⁸² The language of "general categories" is from Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 183.

⁸³ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 169.

⁸⁴ James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, xiv (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1963), 15.

⁸⁶ Baldwin's argument against "recounting" in "Notes for Blues" is thus very similar to his argument against "protest fiction" in *Notes of a Native Son*. There he argues that standard-issue protest literature—from Stowe through Wright—preserves ignorance through the deployment of fictitious

stereotypes. In contrast, Baldwin argues that "the [true] business of the novelist" is an "acceptance" of reality. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Bantam Books, 1968), 11, 17.

⁸⁷ Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 21; Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, xiv.

⁸⁸ Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 21. The following is Baldwin on his reason for writing *Blues for Mister Charlie*: "We are walking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man's attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light." Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, xv.

⁸⁹ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 13.

⁹⁰ Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 139.